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ABSTRACT

Volunteers and other community-based assistants can relieve some of the financial burden brought on by school-budget cutbacks. This publication describes how enlisting the help of senior volunteers and workers benefits both children and seniors, and it presents some guidelines for implementation of intergeneration programs. The programs provide the following benefits: (1) increased chances of senior support for school-funding measures; (2) a greater likelihood of senior participation in child-advocacy efforts outside the school; (3) increased student self-esteem; (4) an expanded curriculum and supply of expertise; and (5) the promotion of intergenerational understanding. Guidelines for getting started include: define needs, recruit and train volunteers, recognize contributions, seek outside funding, and evaluate the program. Six models of intergenerational programs are briefly discussed--traditional, tutor/mentor, bidirectional tutor, skills building, early intervention, and exceptional children. Tax-incentive programs implemented in some Colorado school districts are described, in which older property owners are given a break on their taxes in exchange for their help in the schools. The final section contains an interview with Fernando Torres-Gil, Assistant Secretary for Aging, in which he describes the role of his agency (the Administration on Aging) in establishing and conducting intergenerational programs. A sidebar contains information on the Building Bridges program, which involves elementary schools and nursing homes. (LMI)

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Updating School Board Policies

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Volume 26/Number 5
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Senior Volunteers: Helping Hands & Willing Workers

by Michael Wessely

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If you could have access to free or very low-cost school assistants, would you use them? If you received an image boost in the bargain, would it help you decide? As you know, school boards are finding that budget cutbacks make it increasingly difficult to staff schools with the optimum number of aides and assistants. Volunteers and other community based assistants can relieve some of the financial burden brought on by these cutbacks. And enlisting the help of senior volunteers and workers has been shown to benefit not just children but seniors as well, making them more involved with youth and in the affairs of their local schools.

A growing older and well-educated population means schools have a large and talented volunteer pool but fewer than 5% of persons over age sixty-five volunteer in the schools.

The loss of intergenerational relationships for many of today's youth has been identified as an important factor in the overall fragmentation of American society, leaving children at risk socially, emotionally, and educationally. Benefits that accrue from involving older volunteers in the public schools include enhanced student self esteem, increased intergenerational understanding by students and volunteers, an expanded curriculum and supply of expertise, and added support for the school district's agenda. This can be especially useful in getting support from seniors for school bonds and referenda that supplement a school district's budget.

For some, the term *intergenerational* conjures up images of conflict. The so-called "gray peril" hypothesis contends that older people will oppose local tax increases for programs, especially for public education, that do not directly benefit them but recent studies have contradicted this. The fact is they are benefitted by better education in their communities and many seniors have come to realize that fact.

Volunteers

A growing older and well-educated population means schools have a large and talented pool from which to obtain volunteers. However, of the persons over age 65 who are active in volunteer programs, fewer than 5 percent volunteer in the schools. This small percentage should raise concerns for school administrators because a ready supply of assistants is going unused during a time when budget crises abound. This becomes especially important in communities where older adults represent a large percentage of the population. Without connections to the older generation, schools loose important allies and resources.

Their work in the schools lets seniors see, firsthand, the problems troubling our schools — crowded class-

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rooms, shortages of textbooks, undisciplined student behavior. These problems are revealed to older volunteers when they work in the schools helping them to better appreciate the unique needs of schools.

To increase the numbers of volunteers and their voting and advocacy support, intergenerational cooperation should be encouraged and nurtured by school districts. This may be accomplished through careful planning.

Getting Started

Probably the most important step in initiating an intergenerational program is *defining your needs*. You need to be aware of those areas in the schools that require special assistance or special attention. Working with school administrators and teachers, the superintendent and board can determine how best to identify the school's needs. Additional coordination with community service organizations, like those affiliated with your local United Way campaign, for instance, can lead to quality staffing sources.

Recruiting and training your volunteer staff takes care and should be done systematically. Older adults need to be convinced that their contributions will make a real difference in the schools. Make it clear that their work will only be required for a limited, well-defined time. Applications need to be developed to help identify the best candidates and to establish a pool of potential workers, as well. Community organizations equipped to train older adult volunteers may be able to provide instructors to train your assistants. It is essential that you and other school representatives clearly communicate the needs of the school and the expectations associated with their service.

Regular *recognition* of volunteer contributions is also important. Doing so helps retain their interest in providing needed services and it can attract others because the work will be viewed as significant and worth the effort.

When necessary, don't hesitate to look for outside *funding* sources to support the many aspects of these programs. School foundations, corporations and community organizations can help. Appointing a committe, preferably headed by an experienced fund-raiser, will increase the chances for success.

Finally, program evaluation must be unending. Interviews with the volunteers and school personnel along with regular progress reports can provide valuable information for future administrative planning and successful task assignments.

Six Models of Intergenerational Programs

Researchers working for the AARP identified six typical programs that linked senior volunteers with students in the public schools.

Traditional - This model represents nearly 60 percent of all senior support services in the schools. In the traditional model, seniors function as aides, assistants and specialized teachers interacting with students in regular classroom situations.

Tutor/Mentor - Seniors work one-on-one with youngsters at-risk educationally helping them to increase their academic skills and helping them build self-esteem and a positive outlook.

Bidirectional Tutor - In this model the seniors and students possess specialized skills that they communicate to one another. This shared educational experience helps both generations to better appreciate the value that each generation possesses. Reading and computer literacy programs are examples of the kinds of shared activities characterized by bidirectional tutoring.

Skills Building - Instruction in behavioral and social skills are the essence of this model. Students are helped by seniors who share with them the subtleties of situational behaviors that make-up successful human interactions and relationships.

Early Intervention - Like the title implies, this model places seniors with preschoolers helping to prepare them for entrance into school. They provide a safe and warm atmosphere for the

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One current strategy for increasing senior participation in school activities is through tax incentives.

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children that supports the positive aspects of schooling.

Exceptional Children - In this program, senior volunteers work with developmentally disabled children. The patience and life experiences of the seniors can help them cope with the special needs of these students

A Special Kind of Volunteering

Not all older workers in the schools are unpaid volunteers. One current strategy for increasing senior participation in school activities is through ***tax incentive programs***.

Several Colorado school districts have been giving older property owners a break on their taxes in exchange for their help in the schools. The idea is to increase community involvement in the schools, particularly among older residents who are less likely to support school bond issues than younger residents with school-age children. Many elderly persons feel rising property taxes, which are difficult to meet on their fixed budgets, place them at odds with the schools. Indeed, older Michigan voters are credited with a lobbying effort that saw property taxes in that state cut by 65 percent.

School officials believe the public relations benefits of the programs are important. Program participants will speak favorably about the schools among their peers increasing the possibility of soliciting their support for various school issues. Additionally, students benefit from the social interactions with members of a different, younger generation.

Older workers may serve as tutors, library assistants, bus helpers and even as grounds keepers. Some supply skills and talents they already possess — speaking a foreign language or providing musical accompaniment for student plays and recitals. And some older workers, in a reversed tutoring role, learn new skills, such as computer operation, from the students.

Participants work a set number of hours calculated to meet the requirements of each individual district. For example, they may work for 100 hours at $4.50 per hour earning a total of $450, the portion of their property taxes that normally goes to the schools. Schedules are arranged to suit the lifestyles of the older workers and can be spread over the entire school year or scheduled for as short a period as one month. Advocates of tax incentive programs believe that flexible scheduling is an important factor in achieving program successes.

Operated much like volunteer programs that are run in many school districts across the country, the added component of pay allows schools to draw from a larger pool of participants. And many workers enjoy their jobs well enough to remain in them after they have met the maximum time and pay requirements.

One area that Colorado needed to address concerned the tax liability for these programs so the legislature drafted a law to clarify eligibility and payment issues. It states that participants must be at least 60 years old and they must own and occupy their residence. Although the tax rebates count as taxable income, deductions for pension withholdings are not required. Additionally, tax brackets for older citizens typically placed them in a position where declaring rebate income is less costly than making the entire property tax payment.

In general, the management of these programs is coordinated by the older workers themselves. Additionally, each school district sets its own budget level and pay scale to accommodate the individual needs of the district. This combination allows administration of the tax incentive program to preserve the local autonomy and unique needs of the district.

School districts using this program to increase the number of older workers they have in their schools indicated that some added bureaucratic problems can arise. However, remaining confident in the community and committing the district to the success of the program, they insist, will pay dividends through continued support of the schools by the generation that has been described as having little interest in doing so.

Benefits

Seniors who participate in school activities and projects are more likely to support referenda and bond issues that represent the life blood of public schools. This is especially important because seniors, in general, have gained political advantages over the young in local tax referenda campaigns because they regularly register and vote in larger proportions. Seniors can literally make or break school funding measures.

It also has been demonstrated that seniors involved in projects in schools are more inclined to participate in advocacy efforts on behalf of children outside the schools. Furthermore, there is an important role for intergenerational programs that build coalitions between advocates for children and advocates for the elderly. This "pooled" effort naturally strengthens the impact each group has on its respective targeted audiences, thus making their advocacy priorities more effective

An Interview with Fernando Torres-Gil, Assistant Secretary for Aging

The following is an interview with Fernando M. Torres-Gil , the Nation's first Assistant Secretary for Aging, in which he describes the role his agency plays in the establishment and conduct of intergenerational programs. Mr. Torres-Gil directs the Administration on Aging which carries out a wide range of responsibilities under the Older Americans Act (OAA). As Assistant Secretary for Aging, Torres-Gil serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Health and Human Services on matters related to an aging society and as the Federal Government's leading advocate for the elderly. His primary goals

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are to serve today's older population and to create a blueprint for meeting the needs of future retirees. Although the Administration on Aging's primary target is the elderly, under Torres-Gil's leadership it also strives to help the families and friends who help older people maintain their independence.

Fernando M. Torres-Gil
[W]e are . . . working to educate and inform the general public, including policy makers, about the importance of critical programs so that cuts do not hurt the most vulnerable among us — the elderly, the poor, the disabled, the children.

Updating: What are some of the projects the Administration on Aging (AoA) is currently working on to support intergenerational cooperation in the nation's public schools?

Torres-Gil: While this issue has not been the primary focus of the AoA, it is one of great importance as it is an issue that brings together generations for the common good of all. AoA does, through Title IV of the OAA, which authorizes research, training and demonstration projects, provide start-up grant money for intergenerational programs that support cooperation between the elderly and the young, sometimes in a school setting or in addition to a formal school setting. Some of the grants that have been funded by AoA include: *Boston Reaching Across Generations*. (Action for Boston Community Development) This project focuses on aspects of social support needs among elders and at-risk youth which have not been fully addressed in other intergenerational mentoring programs. It is designed to respond to the exceptional isolation experienced by low-income minority elders with functional impairments by involving them as older volunteers. The project trains frail and disabled elders as mentors to at-risk youth. In return, the youth volunteer to assist elderly mentors with services such as shopping or escorting an elder to the doctor. *Teaching - Learning Communities-Multigenerational Family Empowerment Program at Eastern Michigan University*. This program demonstrated a model to link older adults (senior aides) participating in the Department of Labor Senior Community Service Employment Program, with children, youth and their parents receiving Section 8 housing support, and the local school district. The project model demonstrated how interorganizational collaboration can work to better meet the respective goals of each organization and the persons served by them. *Hand in Hand: Multigenerational Assistance Exchange Program* (North Carolina University). The goals of this program were to improve service to at-risk minority elderly and children and to recruit and train minority students for service employment. The project employed minority college students as outreach aides to inform and assist older people in applying for public benefits and obtaining services. In exchange, elders were invited to volunteer as mentors, tutors and companions for at-risk children in the Head Start and Youth Enrichment Experience Programs.

In exchange for services that help them to apply for public benefits, seniors are invited to volunteer as mentors, tutors and companions for at-risk children.

In addition to funding projects in this particular area, the OAA Amendments of 1992 authorized a new component as part of its Title III nutrition program, entitled *School Based Meals for Volunteer Older Individuals and Multigenerational Programs*. This program is designed to authorize grants to states to provide hot meals to seniors who volunteer in public elementary and secondary schools, and to provide multigenerational activities involving older individuals and students. This new component was added in response to Congressional concerns that there are many older individuals who could benefit from the congregate nutrition program but who live in areas where these programs are not available. Unused or under-used space in school buildings can be used for multigenerational programs serving older individuals in exchange for volunteer commitments. To date, however, Congress has not appropriated funding for this component.

Updating: What strategies would you consider to be effective in recruiting older volunteers/employees to work in our public schools?

Torres-Gil: These strategies include encouraging older persons with a vested interest in schools -- because they are taxpayers and, more frequently, grandparents raising school age children, — to serve as mentors in public school settings and encouraging community service organizations, such as Kiwanis, Rotary Club, VFW or American Legion, to become involved in school activities and mutual fundraising opportunities to be used for common purposes. These types of organizations can enlist the aid of everyone in the community, including seniors and schools. Another strategy would be to utilize seniors in varying capacities in the pub-

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lic schools through Title V of the OAA, Senior Community Service Employment Program, which provides part- or full-time employment to low income older Americans, and through the Senior Corps administered by the Corporation for National Service. Another strategy would be encouraging the business community to become involved — either financially or through technical support — because among that sector are people of all ages including parents and grandparents who have an interest in education and the future.

Updating: How do you think "ageism" has impacted on intergenerational programming?

Torres-Gil: "Ageism," sadly, has had a very negative impact on intergenerational programming further dividing young and older groups. It is unfortunate because intergenerational programs should, and in some instances, are working to eradicate negative stereotypes of older persons. Unfortunately, this is a stereotype that is hard to erase and quite disappointing considering the tremendous resources and potential of each group and the impact these groups could have if they united. But, like any challenge, it is one that can be overcome.

Updating: What positive outcomes do you believe are possible when intergenerational programs build coalitions between advocates for children and advocates for the elderly? Do you believe that intergenerational programs involving elderly and children are part of a larger work advocating educational reform in the United States?

Torres-Gil: Intergenerational programs involving elderly and children may, in fact, be part of a larger work advocating educational reform. Society at its best is one where we all work together for a common goal. By bringing together the generations, we foster greater cooperation and understanding of all aspects of society. Older generations have much to give younger people and, likewise, younger people can teach older ones to see things through their own eyes. Interaction will allow them to become more vested in improving the education of successive generations.

Some positive outcomes are the benefit of shared experiences, the fact that there is often strength in numbers and it often takes numbers to change policy and institute reform. Also, intergenerational programs allow the elderly and youth to get to know and learn from each other thereby lessening tensions. This type of harmony could result in less choosing sides or pitting one group against the other, especially when it comes to dividing finite resources.

Updating: The new Congress has already made it clear that education and programs for the elderly will experience significant cuts in federal funding. What ideas are being generated by the Administration on Aging to reduce the effect of these cuts?

Torres-Gil: The AoA is presently embarking on an initiative entitled "the Blueprint for an Aging Society" which is being designed to bring together the public and private sectors to educate persons of all ages that there is much they can do to plan for a healthier, more active and longer life. Each of us has a role to play. Being healthier and more active will allow older people to live longer and more independently within their homes and communities and possibly prevent the expense of premature institutionalization or unnecessary hospitalization.

We are also looking to consolidate aging programs under the AoA in an effort to create a more efficient and customer oriented system of services for older persons and their families.

And, finally, we are, together with our stakeholders, working to educate and inform the general public, including policy makers, about the importance of critical programs so that cuts do not hurt the most vulnerable among us — the elderly, the poor, the disabled, the children. ■

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Some additional information sources for intergenerational programs include:

Generations Unlimited
c/o Child Welfare League of America
440 First Street, NW, Suite 310,
Washington, DC 20001-2085

National Council on Aging, Inc.
409 Third Street, SW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20024

American Association of Retired Persons
601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049

Reversed Volunteerism

How it Works

Representatives from the elementary school and the nursing home serve as program coordinators. They plan joint activities for the children and residents with the guidance of *Building Bridges* staff and through the use of the program's manual and curriculum newsletter. Additionally, networking opportunities for providers are conducted providing them with opportunities to share ideas and experiences.

Building Bridges sensitizes children to the needs of the frail elderly, instills in them a spirit of volunteerism in the children, promotes good public relations, encourages community involvement, and introduces the children to careers in the health care field. And it makes initiation of a school's intergenerational programming easier because the design is in place.

For additional information contact Joann Leonard, Program Director, *Building Bridges* Program, Alliance for Better Nursing Home Care, 1213 Elmwood Avenue, Providence, RI 02907, (401) 785-3340.